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SOFT

EDITORIAL

The central purpose of Queens College, as stated in the September issue of the *Queens College Bulletin*, is to graduate liberally educated persons. Most of us would agree that the liberally educated person has acquired skills in thinking and in expression—perhaps even in living. The disciplined mind, for instance, has learned to accept or reject fact only after honest intellectual inquiry has been pursued to the furthest extent possible to the individual. And it is the responsibility of each student to endeavor to understand and submit to certain disciplines.

Queens has, during recent years, grown and expanded at an amazing rate. The college has provided for the student every convenience to aid her in acquiring the education she seeks. But the college cannot present the student with the most valuable possession of her college experience—a liberally educated mind. This can be gained only when the individual has first sought, and then practiced the scrutiny and considered judgment inherent in disciplined thinking.

If the student is unwilling to accept the responsibility of acquiring a disciplined mind, she has no right to assume her unwillingness is the fault of any other person. No one else will have denied her the same chance offered to all for liberal education; but she can deny herself the mastery of her intellect.

B. J.

The Little Boy

Fuzzy kitten, red dump truck, and modeling clay
Grew boring companions in play.
The gate and the yard fence chafed the child;
"I'm a big boy now," he thought as he smiled.

Enticed by the wood brook, the forest, wide plain,
A circumscribed lawn could not restrain.
Inebriate stalker in liberty roamed,
Saw sparrows that tittered, whirlpools that foamed.

He spied a serpent asleep on a rock,
His footstep crunched, and sleep was unlocked.
One subtle green eye peered at the boy;
A white butterfly flitted by with frail joy.

With both in view the boy stood stone still,
Then crept toward the snake with deliberate thrill.
When his hand stretched toward the serpent politic,
The fangs pierced; it was over, amazingly quick.

But, strange to say, there was no pain,
And he liked the feel of venom in vein.
Then he went home
And strangled his cat.

—SUZANNE MACRAE

Walt Whitman

Should We Listen or Should We Laugh?

Martha Huntley

It seems that all anthologies of modern American poetry begin with Walt Whitman. To realize the break with the past that Whitman represents, one has only to contrast the structure and content of Bryant's ode, "To a Waterfowl" with Whitman's ode, "To a Waterfowl" in the *Children of Adam* section of his *Leaves of Grass*,¹ to himself:

O my body! I dare not desert the likes of
you in other men and women, nor the
likes of the parts of you, . . .

Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of
the ears,

Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eyebrows,
and the waking or sleeping of the lids,

Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the
mouth, jaws, and the jaw-hinges,

Nose, nostrils of the nose, and the partition
Cheeks, temples, forehead, chin, throat,

back of the neck, neck-slue,

Strong shoulders, manly beard, scapula,
hind-shoulders, and the ample side-
round of the chest,

Upper-arm, armpit, elbow-socket, lower-
arm, arm-sinews, armbones, . . .

The poem goes on and on, including everything . . . "Ribs, belly, backbone", and "Hips, hip-sockets, hip-strength, inward and outward round, man-balls, man-root" . . . and, "The

lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and clean."

Little wonder that Whitman's few readers were appalled at his sprawling catalogue of anatomical details. The formality of an age in which even many married couples didn't call each other by their first names was echoed in formal poetry, following stiff rules of meter and rhyme. It was, after all, in an age of cover-up in dress (remember the neck-to-ankle nightwear that successfully hid many a wife from her husband?), as well as in literature, that Whitman wrote a poem called "O Hymen! O Hymanee!"

Today, when our literature is saturated with realism, sexual and otherwise, we do not find Whitman's poetry very shocking, but we do find a great deal of it silly:

I will plant companionship thick as trees
along all the rivers of America, and along
the shores of the great lakes, and all over
the prairies,

I will make inseparable cities with their
arms about each other's necks,

By the love of comrades,

By the manly love of comrades,

For you these from me, O Democracy, to
serve you ma femme!

For you, for you I am trilling these songs.²

The crudeness of this kind of poem (Whitman would probably say "this sort of stuff") was something Whitman crowed about:

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

In all of his poetry Whitman is himself—at least, himself as seen by himself. He talks in his poetry, and speaks sometimes in a soft, sweet tone: "The little one sleeps in its cradle/ I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies with my hand"; sometimes in a grotesquely grandiose one: "See my cantabile—you Libertad!"

In fact, Whitman's poetry is himself; he states flatly "I celebrate myself and sing myself." He sings himself from the rooftops, he shouts himself; his poetry is a terrific superstructure of egotism. He enlarges himself until he is not merely a heroic figure, but a whole universe—"Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son."

There is no denying that the ever-present Whitman becomes a nuisance; the poet intrudes too much into his own poetry. There is no denying that this poet when he is bad, is terrible. Why then does this self-singer, this almost laughable egotist, appear in almost all American anthologies?

Whitman has every right to be included in any consideration of American poetry, because many of the characteristics of modern poetry in the United States are a legacy from him. He was one of the first poets to sing an American song, to try to present a truly American idiom; he was one of the first to see the need of humanizing science; he was one of the first to try to combine the classical with the contemporary; he dared to be different, and freer in form; he was defiantly honest in subject matter and refused to exalt only the pretty; he battled prudery and taboos against recognizing sex. And if he made mistakes, at least his mistakes were new ones, not the old ones of placing English songbirds in American settings, or of

insulting the intelligence by wrapping the body away from sight in ultra-delicate phraseology.

Whitman sang his uniqueness, but he also tried to be representative, to be universal—"For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." In praising himself, he tried to show the wonder that is everybody. An example of his effort to be both himself and everybody else is "Song of Myself." The lines of this poem contain Whitman's lasting legacy to all Americans who read poetry. He succeeded in immortalizing himself, and in the giving of himself, enriched a national, and (through the influence of American poetry on world poetry) international literature.

I will go to the bank by the wood and
become undisguised and naked.

Whitman threw off his own clothes, and at the same time, helped to remove much of the hyper-clothing of poetry of his day. Like Mark Twain, he resented having to wear clothes, to hide his identity, and since he felt all clothing to be an affectation, perhaps he, like Twain,³ exaggerated his apparel until clothing itself was shown for the costume and sham it often is.

To Whitman, everything was a poem and each man a poet. He urged his readers to open themselves to the poetry outside of books. He wanted people to see the poetry of reality:

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems, . . .

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books, . . .

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

He dared to write of the great reality of sex:

Urge and urge and urge,
Always the procreant urge of the world.

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance,
always substance and increase,
always sex, . . .

To elaborate is no avail, learn'd and un-
learn'd feel that it is so.

He scorned segregation of "private parts," he refused to discriminate against parts of his own body:

Welcome is every organ and attribute of
me, and of any man hearty and clean,
Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is
vile, and none shall be less familiar than
the rest.

He said in poetry that went from the heights to the gutter what others would not. He spoke of the "howls restrained by decorum." His vast catalogue of poetry was big enough to include human subjects that earlier poets had snubbed: "women taken suddenly who hurry home and give births to babes," "the flap of the curtained litter, a sick man inside borne to the hospital," the butcher-boy, the whale harpooner, the trapper and his red bride, the suicide on the bar-room floor, the runaway slave, the deacons, the lunatic, the rancher, the deck hand, the machinist, the contralto in the choir loft. All these and countless others he hugged to himself and sang of in his song of himself. He could see poetry in almost everything, and could call attention to something without idealizing it: "Do not call the tortoise unworthy because he is not something else."

If, in reading of Whitman's life, we realize that his great claims of masculinity and virility are perhaps false; that what we considered his honesty in proclaiming bravely his manhood is but an empty boast, then we should read more from his lines in his song of himself:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as
much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of
others,
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as
well as a man,
Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse and
stuff'd with the stuff that is fine.

The religion in Whitman's poetry is unlike the religious American poetry that came before it, and similar to Emily Dickinson's in its relevance and aliveness; in its own freedom from the clerical:

The wonder is always and always how
there can be a mean man or an infidel . . .

and: a mouse is miracle enough to stagger
sextillions of infidels . . .

and: the mechanic's wife with her babe at
her nipple interceding for every person
born . . .

the bull and the bug never worshipp'd half
enough,

Dung and dirt more admirable than was
dream'd.

"I find letters from God dropt in the street," he says, "and every one is sign'd by God's name."

The religion in Whitman's poetry is like that in *Song of Solomon*, rich and sensual, expressed in terms of the beauty of life and of living. Some of his poetry is like the poetry of the Hebrews in its form and in its exaggeration and rough song. Whitman's poetry contributed a great deal to overcoming the barren nature of religion that we received from the Puritans. Someone has said that the Puritans left us nothing in the way of literary heritage but the devil, and even he found the American climate too chilly, and departed. Whitman gave a new richness to America's literary heritage:

I believe in flesh and the appetites . . .

I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and
all so luscious.

Whitman placed American poetry in an American setting. He explored the continent in his verse. Unlike many writers of his period, he did not allow his art to suffer from his anti-slavery feelings; he never tried to make abolitionist tracts from poetry. He showed in his poetry great compassion for slaves, but he did not show

hatred for slaveholders. He said "I am afoot with my vision," and he called himself "A Southerner soon as a Northerner." He allowed his love for the human being to rise above his ideas of what a human being *ought* to be, and loved him for what he was. This was a distinct change from the highly idealistic, conscience-haunted, and very Puritan ideas of man that pervaded the writings of Hawthorne and other earlier American authors.

In singing of himself, Whitman saw his faults, though he certainly tried to justify them and even make them into virtues. "I discover myself on the verge of a usual mistake," he says; and, "I know perfectly well my own egotism."

But he also knew the value of the legacy of this song of himself he was leaving behind, and he knew the price of it:

Behold, I do not give lectures or a little
charity,

When I give I give myself.

All these things which have so deeply influenced modern American poetry are expressed by Whitman in *Song of Myself*, even though this is not usually considered one of his best poems.

If we were discussing the poet at his best, we should turn to "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," where he tells the story of a small boy learning of the meaning and beauty of death from a widowed bird, or to his beautiful tribute to Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Doorway Bloom'd." These poems are controlled and meaningful. T. S. Eliot, not an admirer of all Whitman's poems, has praised these two, and says that when Whitman speaks of the lilacs or the mocking-bird, his theories and beliefs drop away like a needless pretext.

But even if *Song of Myself* didn't contain so many influences upon later American poets, it would be remembered for the imaginative beauty of such passages as:

A child said What is the grass? fetching
it to me with full hands,
How could I answer the child? I do not
know what it is any more than he.
. . . I guess it is the handkerchief of the
Lord . . .

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, sprouting alike in broad
zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as well as
white . . .

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut
hair of graves . . .

The smallest sprout shows that there is
really no death, . . .

And to die is different from what any one
supposed and luckier.

In passages like this, we see Whitman at his best, and realize that his poetry has indeed left its best characteristics to American literature—a fresh sense of freedom, a proudly unclothed beauty, and a common-sense sort of wisdom. Whitman was not always the sage he would have liked to be in his poetry. He would have liked to be a prophet, and tried to be, sometimes perhaps too hard. But in one poem, at least, he truly was prophetic:

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians
to come!

Not today is to justify me and answer what
I am for,

But you, a new brood, native, athletic,
continental, greater than before known,
Arouse! For you must justify me.

I myself but write one or two indicative
words for the future,

I but advance a moment only to wheel and
hurry back in the darkness.

I am a man who, sauntering along without
fully stopping, turns a casual look upon
you and then averts his face,

Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
Expecting the main things from you.

In this poem Whitman admits his shortcomings at the same time he sings of his own rich legacy to the future of American poetry. The man, like an eccentric uncle leaving behind a fortune, will be remembered for his unusual spirit, and for his huge gifts. We can't really laugh at Whitman; the treasure he left us, including himself as part of the gift, is too great. Instead we find ourselves listening to

him both in his poems and in the poems of the many poets who followed—and smoothed—the rough paths he hewed.

insincerity; . . . a pretense that we despise the graces of harmony and form; and we put them on to propagate that lie and back it up." *On the Damned Human Race* (New York, 1962), p. 234.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York, 1960), p. 104.
² *Ibid.*, p. 115.
³ Twain once wrote, "We must put up with our clothes as they are—they have their reason for existing. They are on us to expose us . . . they are a sign of

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Night Owl

At seven o'clock I rise to shine
Limpy, sleepy, groggy;
I have my eyes forced up by nine,
But am I ever boggy!
By noon I answer to my name
Aside consistent yawning;
At three, it's fairly safe to claim
Full consciousness is dawning.
By five o'clock, though it's still slow,
My mind has kept on running;
By ten o'clock, I coin a "mot"
Or "fou"-ly take to punning.
But by eleven, well be said,
I'm fresher than a daisy;
Wide awake, though tucked in bed,
I scintillate like crazy.

—KITTY FRASER RANDOLPH

I Bask In The Late Summer

A Venetian gold mist covered all imperfection
In the trees, which seemed to hover over me,
 protective as older brothers;
In the skinny bird with the freckled chest,
 which prissed down the rocks to bathe in the pond;
In the gentle wind, which was chill,
 but which the forever hopeful human heart
 would only admit as comfortable,
And in my mind, which was—for those moments—
 at peace with God and itself.

—ANN ALDRICH

The Sense Of Spring

Like Thomas, unbelieving,
Until our hope could be
Grasped by fingers,
Inhaled through nostrils,
Absorbed by eyes,
Unable to accept a psychic palpability,
We stroked the purple violet
And breathed the wine of hyacinth
And marked the pink of peach bloom.
Then by degrees our doubts gave way
To cautious joy.
Yet was surrender justified
To but a quarter of a whole?
Would not the blossoms in due time
Wilt and dry and freeze?
They would, we sighed.
But with assurance of
The cyclic resurrection,
Our skeptic thoughts dissolved in sap.

—SUZANNE MACRAE

The Friends and Relatives of Charlie Mort and Florence Wilson: Owners of Wilson's General Store

Rosanne Eubanks

ED

"Wilson's General Store—Dry Goods, Groceries, General Merchandise." These freshly painted words glistened in the early morning sunlight as Florence and Charlie Mort Wilson stood close together and squinted up at the new red and green sign bearing their name.

"Makes me kinda sad to see Papa's name painted right over," muttered Florence. "Oughta be his till he dies."

"Don't be ridiculous, Florence," scolded Charlie Mort, "it's our store now!" He reached in his pocket and pulled out the new lease, unfolded it carefully and examined its contents once again. "Yep," he boasted, "it's all ours—every keg 'a nails, every pair 'a work shoes, and every piece 'a canned goods. Ther's a heap 'a junk in that store needs cleanin' out, too. Honey, I bet your papa ain't restocked them dry goods shelves in twenty years! We got lot'a work to do." He reached for her hand and gripped it firmly while he talked about "puttin' in a new meat box and paintin' those dirty cobweb walls a light mint green." They took a last proud look at the bright sign, then hurried back toward the front of the store. They had sensed that "folks were gitten a big kick" out of their interest in the new sign.

"Sign shore looks nice—sa bright and cheery! Ya know, I would'a had a sign like that too. But every time I spoke to ya ma, Florence, 'bout hirin' sign painters, she would really get her feathers ruffled! 'Ed,' she would say, 'we need house painters more'n you need any sign painter.' And the old woman was right, too, I suppose."

Thick cigar smoke clouded over his rosy cheeks and wrinkled forehead, leaving visible the dim outline of a rather typical old man, born and raised in a small, southern Georgia town. He wore black high-topped shoes, a blue serge suit, a crisp white dress shirt, and a black bow tie. A tiny pocket knife hung from a fine gold watch chain connected to his suspender strap, and he kept a supply of self-whittled toothpicks in the breast pocket of his

worn coat. He was sitting rared back in a straight wicker chair out in front of the store, observing all the commotion going on over at the depot across the street.

"Been watchin' 'um haul cotton over there for years, and I don't intend to stop now, just cause you chullen takin' over ma store!" He waved to Mr. Blanks, the depot manager, who was walking briskly up and down the shipping platform. Mr. Blanks waved back.

"How 'bout a game 'a checkers?" he called. "I feel like beatin' the pulp outa you, you old crow!"

"Now you watch what cha say, Henry," said Ed. "You're a born braggart!—C'mon over here and I'll show you!"

The two friends talked in low amiable voices as they made their way to the back of the store, where the worn checkerboard had been set up on a sturdy nail keg for some forty years now. Ed put an extra piece of coal in the wood stove, while Mr. Blanks settled himself down cautiously in the wooden rocking chair. He laid the checkers out quickly and went into battle.

Charlie Mort and Florence had been cleaning sticky fingerprints from the penny candy showcase, but stopped a minute to hear the friendly argument over the checker game going on in the back of the store.

"Move your king back, Ed—you know that's not legal! Wait a minute, you played outa turn! Yep, I heard 'bout the new barber. Your turn now."

Florence looked at Charlie. "Charlie, that sign . . . I just don't feel right 'bout it. Just because that says 'Wilson,' Charlie, doesn't make it really ours. It's Papa's store, deed or no deed." She heard her papa whistle a familiar little tune, and she knew Ed had won the first checker game. She glanced around the renovated store. Bolts of faded calico, high-buttoned shoes, and wide outdated hair ribbons had been taken from dusty shelves to be replaced by bolts of dacron, flat-heeled shoes, and cheap cosmetics. Everything was modern now except Papa, Mr. Blanks, the wood stove, and the checkerboard.

LILLY BEN

"A Southern belle turned businesswoman" was what they called her. "Yes Sir," mumbled Ralph Strickland, the town banker, "she's got a shrewd head on them thin shoulders all right, but she's a far sight from that bright-eyed little scamp I used to watch tease you boys not so many years ago!" Chewing on a nickel cigar and talking at the same time, he continued on about Lilly Ben Maden. "Lord, I remember when ole Charlie Mort brought a brand new Ford all did up with fire-engine red seat-covers and silver fender-horns, just to court her in on Sunday afternoons. Yep, she was a pretty one, perked up there in that front seat beside Charlie—all them orange curls

pulled up under a straw bonnet and holding a big bunch 'a yellow-faced daisies in her lap—and ole Charlie grinnin' from ear to ear!"

"And just look'd her now," muttered dog-faced Willie Robert, the town barber. The three friends cut their eyes over to a freckled, dusty woman who jumped briskly out of an old, dented, green Dodge before it hardly had time to come to a full stop. They watched her almost gallop over to the display windows in front of Wilson's General Store. She glanced for a second at the mixed arrangement of aluminum pots and piece-goods in the window, and then checked her want list scribbled down hurriedly on the back of a used envelope. And slamming the double screen door behind her, she moved jerkily back to the rear of the store where plows, mule halters, and sacks of hog feed were kept.

"C'mere Tom!" she called. A ten-year-old Negro boy scampered over to help her lift two sacks of hog feed and some cotton fertilizer to the cash register. Her voice, once soft and liquid, was scratchy and strained from long years of yelling at farmhands and crews of cotton pickers. She pulled a fifty-dollar bill out of her dress pocket and laid it down precisely on the oilcloth-covered counter near the cash register.

"Lemme pay m' bill for last month too, Charlie. Won't be gitten into town much for awhile with the cotton season fixin' to start. Why, you may not lay eyes on me till the middle of October—it's either trouble with the boll weevils or trouble with the niggers that keeps me married to that place! Don't even know why I stay out there—not makin' a bit of profit—just enough to break even."

"Lilly Ben Maden, you're worth more'n any woman in Pike County!" The man in Charlie Mort Wilson flamed up at Lilly Ben's shrewd talking. "Woman, you've got enough down there in Strickland's bank to sail around the world three times and *still* have some left over—you oughta be ashamed for talkin' like that!"

The gap in her cigarette-stained teeth seemed to widen as she grinned slyly at Wilson through pale, cracked lips. He watched her hands, all red and dusted with cotton fertilizer, push the change from the fifty dollars into the huge, gingham pocket of her faded sundress. To avoid Wilson's cold stare, she turned a white fleshy back to him, and yelled to Tom to load the farm supplies in the trunk of her green car.

Wilson did not watch her leave, but he heard the uneven thud of her wedge-heeled shoes on the wooden floor gradually fade. He knew that she was gone. He knew also that she would light a cigarette after she cranked the car motor, and that she would hold it in the side of her mouth like a man while she drove. And he thought about the red dust from the county road sprinkling particles into her hair already much the same color—and that it would not really make a difference. "Tonight," he thought, "over a pitcher of fresh churned buttermilk, she will check every figure in her ledger book, and smile at her profit for the week. Wonder if she ever gets frightened out there in those high ceilin'd rooms, all surrounded by antique clocks and canopy beds?" He sighed. "She shore use to squeal like a frightened mouse every time my ole Ford backfired!"

LINDA

Linda Smith, one of Concord, Georgia's, most respected widows, lived alone in a fine, old two-story brick house with rooms that were swept and tidied weekly—then locked and closed off. Linda lived in a drab back room of the house, which had only two substantial pieces of furniture—a plain, black, iron bed and an unsightly wooden wardrobe reaching to the ceiling.

Any adult citizen of Concord could tell you that the Smith house, fifteen years ago, was the center of the town's social activities, where banquets, receptions, and teas were given continually in its two large parlors, decorated in solid mahogany furniture. In the winter months, two bright fires in either room illuminated the cranberry crystalware to a glowing cherry, and sparkled on the surface of the Smith monogrammed silver. And charming Linda, dressed precisely in a velvet dress of dark red, could be seen flitting from room to room, shedding exactly the proper amount of attention on each of her honored guests. Then Linda's husband died suddenly of a heart attack, seemingly taking her lively spirit to the grave with him. It appeared that, within a few months, Linda turned into a grouchy ashen-faced woman. Deep gray circles appeared under her once friendly green eyes, and her wide, oversized mouth collapsed into a down-turned slit surrounded by a mass of flabby, wrinkled skin.

Linda Smith was the cause of many a squabble between Florence and Charlie Mort Wilson, the co-owners of Wilson's General Store.

"Charlie, if you let that woman come in this store one more time and pester you with all her false ailments, I just think I'll leave you and never come back. And that ain't all, either—you know good 'n' well she does all her fancy buyin' down at Strickland's—*then* she comes up here and buys a ten cent package of aspirin powder and expects a dollar's worth of sympathy. Wouldn't be sa bad if she'd pick some other afternoon besides Saturday, when Bob Doden and the rest of them sawmill hands are in here tryin' to buy groceries!"

"Shhh Florence, here she comes now, and you'd better behave yourself! Ain't no excuse for you begrudging the woman a kind ear once in awhile. She must get pretty tired of complainin' to four walls. It ain't gonna hurt you to listen to her."

A lily-skinned ghost of a woman dressed in pale, pink Irish linen came floating into the junky store, followed by a stiff-legged chauffeur who used to double as butler during past entertainment days. Her thin brown hair was now blotched with spots of new unmanageable grey, and was gathered low at the nape of her slim neck, and held in place by crowds of silver hairpins. Cameo earrings covered her exposed ears, and a brooch to match was pinned neatly in the middle of her low collar.

Her proper Victorian voice spoke directly to Charlie, but pointedly ignored Florence, who was shelving cans not ten feet away. Though she rarely left her musty back room, she managed to keep abreast of the town gossip and usually victimized Charlie into listening to it.

"Why," she gasped, "did you hear that that horrible Maude Henderson is running around with another man? No, it's not Jake anymore—it's that smart-ellic school principal they just hired!"

"Now, Linda," Charlie ventured, "you ought not to talk about folks unless you're sure of ya facts. You could do lots 'a damage to completely innocent folks."

"Well," Linda snapped, "my head was hurting that day, so perhaps I didn't hear Maude correctly. When those migraine headaches come, I can't get a thing right! By the way, please give me three packages of headache powders."

"Three packages," muttered Charlie,—“you watch out now how many 'a them things you take now. Aspirin powders are powerful stuff!"

Florence, who was out of Linda's sight now, watched her pink, oval fingernails punch bruises into the bunches of fresh bananas displayed on the wooden counter across from where Charlie was standing. And several minutes later, she saw those same slim fingers draw the folds of her fresh voile dress close around her brittle body as Tom, the ten-year-old Negro grocery carrier, accidentally brushed against her. "Well," she said eloquently, "I just can't take any more of this! Henry, please get your cap on quickly and drive me down to Strickland's where they at least hire white help!" The heavy double glass doors banged shut behind the proper lady, but the smell of lilac toilet water and sweet pink powder lingered in the air, and mixed unnaturally with the smell of sweaty overalls and tobacco juice.

"Yes, a fine genteel, cultured lady!" mocked Florence—"and there ain't no excuse for her, either. Other nice ladies' husbands die, every day, and they stay just as decent as they ever were."

"But Florence," begged Charlie Mort, "try and understand! She's a sick woman."

"My understanding's run out, Charlie. Anyway, you always were soft on women! That woman's mean as a snake!"

Not too long after Charlie Mort and Florence had fought about Linda Smith, she was found stretched limply across her iron bed, dead from steady grieving and an overdose of aspirin powders. Her will, written in her own peculiar, fancy handwriting, was found in a deep drawer of her old wardrobe, tied up with a bundle of letters. It read,

I desire that my home, my furniture, and my belongings should become the personal property of Mr. Charlie Mort Wilson, the only man in Concord who tried to understand me.

Linda R. Smith

It didn't take Florence long to forget about her past hatred of Linda Smith, for she and Charlie moved into the red brick house on the hill not two months after Linda's death. All the regular customers of Wilson's General Store were invited to a huge housewarming. Twin fires blazed again in the two front parlors of Linda's old home, and lively voices filled the spacious rooms with new gaiety.

MARIE

Angela Williams

Eva was always taking in stray members of her family. Marie was in the first grade when she started living with Eva. I remember, because Eva constantly reminded me how “You ’n Marie start’d out together.” It seemed only a short while, and then the next thing we knew we were graduating.

Marie was short and solid, about a hundred and thirty pounds. She did all the work around Eva’s house (because Eva was doing for us, you understand), from feeding the few blunt-nosed pigs and plowing crunchy cornstalks under, to scrubbing the kitchen floor spotless, and starching Eva’s uniform every evening. Eva couldn’t brag about Marie enough. “That gal’s a regla work-hoss. I sho’ couldn’t do widout her, now dat’s de trut!”

I liked Marie. Her hands were well-worn—a smooth roughness. (We were always shaking hands affectionately.) A large mouth full of square white teeth was the first thing you noticed about Marie—she grinned all the time. She was darker than Eva, and her bottom lip hung down heavily, showing pink inside. You could see it ’specially when she sang. “She’s a powerful piece in the church choir, ya know,” Eva would say, as Marie gave a demonstration. One summer day I remember she sang so hard her gold-rimmed glasses fogged up. “Colored people sho’ sweat a lot!—Cleans ya out, chile,” Eva explained.

Well, when Marie finished school she got on a Greyhound and headed for Noo York. Eva never said much about it to me except, “The chile’s got ta make money. She’ll send me some ever’ now ’n agin. Lawd knows she’s been a help to me!—she’s a good chile. She’ll be comin’ on back shortly, soon iz she makes a little bit.”

Two years passed. Marie wrote. I read. Eva listened. Marie sent gifts—a scarf, an apron. Eva wore them proudly, and I oohed over them. “Dat chile sho’ ’preshates all I’z done fo’ her! She’ll be gittin’ on home now,” she muttered tiredly.

"Yeah, won't be long," I'd answer brightly, wondering. Eva had been running two houses single-handed since Marie left, and she was getting on up there in age. Her feet were beginning to drag; her laughs were less spontaneous. Now, a slap on the behind brought, "Ya ain't got no feelin's. Ya knows ma heart can't stand sech!" And when Dowse (*her* favorite of my boyfriends, because he ate at least six of her biscuits at every sitting) sneaked up behind her one day while she was Electroluxing, and popped a hand firecracker, she drew a short breath, clutched her sagging breast, and collapsed on the sofa. Though a stiff dose of ammonia fixed her right up, it scared us half to death. Now, when Eva insists, "I can't take it like I usta could," we know it's "de gospel trut!"

About a year ago, during my Christmas vacation, the telegraph office called to say Eva had a telegram. I ran down to get it. Eva, wide-eyed, met me at the front door when I got back. I stuck the yellow envelope in her lined palm. After tearing it open, she handed it to me. Slowly I read: MAMA EVA. CALVIN AND ME GOT MARRIED. DIDN'T WANT IT TO BE NO EXPENSE ON YOU. MERRY CHRISTMAS. RECKON I'LL BE UP HERE A WHILE NOW. YOUR MARIE.

I didn't want to look up. When I finally dropped my hands and lifted my head, I met Eva's blank stare. Red threads ran across the whites of her eyes, that I'd never noticed before. I hadn't noticed the tiny mole just under one eyebrow, either. She sucked in a hunk of air and stretched her lips into a closed-mouth smile, eyes still fixed.

Then she started talking—about how she saw me born and how Daddy talked her into leaving the hospital and coming to work for us that very day. "Seems like jes yes'day I wuz brush'n tangles outcha pretty head—and 'member them weeks at a time when it'd be just me one here wid you chil'un? You sho' had a goin' Mama and Daddy in them days!" My mind wandered back with her.

As punishment Daddy often sent us to bed without supper, but Eva always sneaked us peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and round glasses full of milk. And, you know, I still cut biscuits with a juice glass just as Eva taught me; and I still iron the "little things first" on my dresses.

Suddenly I felt two arms wrapped around me. A heavy head hung over my shoulder, and without a sound Eva cried. Her chin bobbed gently. "You'z still my baby, ain't ya?" Then, without waiting for an answer,—"Course ya is—I *raised* ya—it's fo' sho *you* won't never leave me,—that's *one* thing I knows!" So there I stood dry-eyed, patting Eva's broad back as she wept.

Violets

Elizabeth Rucker

Sometimes I have stopped, on occasional short cuts, not to step on the wild violets that can be found in spots all over our campus, growing scattered among the weeds and grasses.

Wild violets are a rarity for me. Where I live, violets are only house plants that need pots, special soil, and plant food, plus a lot of extra attention. Their leaves are furry and seem almost artificial. Wild violets have a freshness that their hybrid relatives lack, and they thrive easily without any help from gardeners.

During the fall of the year, the violets grow almost unnoticed. Their leaves are a darker green than in the spring and early summer. When springtime comes, their leaves shine a lighter, brighter green. Before long the buds stiffly open and we see that the petals range from a dark purple to a light lavender, or blue, or white. The white blossoms have marked faces, reminding us of small pansies or Johnny-jump-ups.

When we look down at the violet it appears to be growing in a cluster. But noticing more closely, we find that the stems do not spring straight from one central stalk. Each leaf, instead, is growing individually in a community of broad green hearts that seem to have been trimmed by miniature pinking shears.

A frog's-eye view would show that the leaves are designed to catch raindrops and channel them down the stems. The leaf, meeting the stem, broadens to become a part of its perfect drainage system to take water right down to the roots. Shaped like two cupped hands begging for sustenance, the violet stretches to reach for any water that may be offered.

The violet leaf is supported by an intricate network of veins. From the underside of the leaf we see that these veins are swollen and tight with moisture; that they act as the violet-leaf's skeleton, as well as circulation system.

In the spring, when the violet blooms, its fragrance is hardly detectable and almost impossible to describe. Some say that they can smell the flowers, but they must take some deeper whiff than I do, for I have not found any perfume in them at all.

The violet seems delicate, but hardy in that it has to hold its own, growing among the many weeds and grasses that could easily choke it out, and survives through all the seasons and lawn mowings. It blooms profusely in April, covering the ground underneath the boxwood behind Carol Hall. When the plant is dormant again, we tiptoe around it so as not to crush it. However, we may remember that once it has started growing it spreads so vigorously that it is hard to stamp out.



The Jester

He's dying now, a regal sort,
And I'm alive but just a
Happy jovial sport.

I clowned around and sang my
Songs; he ruled and commanded,
Worried and fretted, the whole year round.

I'm safe and sound sitting here,—
It's a soft plush kingly chair.
His to sit on it had been,
Now it's a bed that he lies in.

When in this chair he was a symbol
The people scraped and bowed
When he made his strong demands;
Yet here I sit now in the same
Place, and almost jeer
As on his chair arms I place
My hands.

—RUE BETH ELIOT



A Long And Happy Life

Angela Williams

After reading *A Long and Happy Life*, by Reynolds Price, I began to think we should pay special attention to the twenty-nine-year-old author of this new novel, for Reynolds Price is perhaps our newest blossom in a movement which has been called "the modern Southern flowering" in American literature.¹ In December the young Duke professor won the 1962 Sir Walter Raleigh Cup for the best fiction written by a North Carolinian. In this paper I hope to show why the South should be proud to add the name Price to the list of outstanding writers of the day, if he continues to produce work of the quality of *A Long and Happy Life*, and, since I am a Southerner, and Reynolds Price is a Southerner, I thought it would be appropriate to consider the methods used by two other contemporary Southern writers—Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner—to shed light on *A Long and Happy Life*. We shall see that Price, through the command of Place, or location, and what we speak of as the Jamesian consciousness, has created a novel that represents life—"the only reason for the existence of a novel," as Henry James says.²

In her address, *Place in Fiction*, Eudora Welty stated that "fiction depends on life from Place," and that "the good novel must be visible."³ Place is also transferable,—writer to material, writer to reader. People seem to write best about what they know, and the good writer is always a part of what he writes. I am inclined

to agree with Eudora Welty when she says that all works from native soil will remain the longest understood.

Thomas Wolfe, another native of North Carolina, uses Place skillfully. Needless to say, there are countless other writers who also depend on Place a great deal, such as Melville in *Moby Dick*, and Twain in *Huckleberry Finn*. But it is principally Wolfe's talent in relating so vividly to the reader the section of the country he was born and raised in that makes his works real. The moment the Place is recognized as true, the characters are accepted as real, or so it seems. Anyone who knows Asheville, encircled by mountains with trains winding and whining through them, can better understand Thomas Wolfe, but for one who doesn't, the descriptive skill in *Look Homeward, Angel* will show it to him anyway. At the beginning of the book this paragraph occurs:

In the haunting eternity of these mountains, rimmed in their enormous cup, he found sprawled out on its hundred hills and hollows a town of four thousand people.⁴

In part two we have the following passage where Place is intertwined with almost juicy adjectives:

Nacreous peal light swam faintly about the hem of the lilac darkness; the edges of light and darkness were stitched upon the hills. Morning moved like a pearl-gray tide

across the fields and up the hill-flanks, flowing rapidly down into the soluble dark.⁵

When Wolfe gets even more specific, can any reader forget Dixieland? Or Nigger-town, where, through concrete details, one is forced to experience

The rank stench of the branch, pouring its thick brown sewage down a bed of worn boulders, the smell of wood-smoke and laundry stewing in a black iron yard-pot, and the low jungle cadences of dusk, the forms that slid, dropped, and vanished, beneath a twinkling orchestration of small sounds . . . the larded sizzle of frying fish . . .⁶

From this description, and many more, it is clear that largely because of Wolfe's use of Place, this novel is visible and real to us.

Place gives not only physical location, but it also gives a book a sense of direction, equilibrium. Place is "the state of grace that a story spins through," as Miss Welty aptly puts it, and as Wolfe aptly demonstrates in passages such as the following:

The mountains were his masters. They rimmed in life. They were the cup of reality, beyond growth, beyond struggle and death. They were his absolute unity in the midst of eternal change.⁷

And how does Wolfe's use of Place shed light on *A Long and Happy Life*? Though a mere pamphlet in comparison to the length of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Price's novel gives a sense of Place just as vividly, but in a different way. Both novelists are describing North Carolina, but not only is Price's *Place* different, but the method he uses to help the reader visualize his specific Place is distinct from Wolfe's, as far as I can see.

There is no bulk of landscape description in Price's novel; there isn't time or room for such, because the story itself must move rapidly. But with surprising skill Price scatters small hints through the chapters which give us the lay-of-the-land. Actually, we seldom see the land itself; just see what's growing and crawling and

singing, and then with imagination we make our own pictures, which, strangely enough, turn out to be pretty accurate!

It is true that recurring motifs like the deer, Mr. Isaac's spring, pecan trees, Rosacoke's father's grave, give a sense of unity to his novel, and that Price doesn't limit himself or Place to these details. He stops to mention a narrow road "only side enough for one thing going one way—a car or a truck or a mule and wagon,"⁸ open fields, a creek bed, bitter briars and broomstraw, glossy poison oak, pine trees across the lake, half-mile of bare woods and

. . . a prostrate field where nothing stood straight, only corn with unused ears black from frost and stalks exhausted the color of broomstraw, beat to the ground . . . one mule still where he stood except for his breath wreathing white on the bark of a tree that rose up over him . . . and forked into limbs with nuts by the hundred and twitched on the sky like nerves . . .⁹

Somehow, halfway through the story, you know that you yourself can walk the dusty three miles to Wesley's house, or to Delight Baptist Church, and that you are familiar with the twenty-mile motorcycle ride to Mason's lake. The wonder of it is, that every now and then a neat little picture has been given you, but not often, and that you have filled in all that was missing from it by yourself.

The church stood in the sand under two oak trees, wooden and bleached and square as a gunshell box, daring people not to come.¹⁰

So, gradually we learn about the Place, which was filled in here and there with a path to the spring, a lizard, a red cardinal, an old black-snake, a cedar, songs of rain frogs, leeches, hornets' nests, a whippoorwill, sycamore and dogwood trees, two squawking crows, spiders, a hawk, "them fool guineas," a white heron (that Rosacoke and Wesley failed to see, unfortunately), blackberries, and those inevitable gnats! It was pleasant discovering these things all along, and to have them add up, almost imperceptibly, to a real picture of Place.

Like a snake winding through the whole story, a sense of dryness and hotness persists, and does much to set the mood of the story as well as to give one a better sense of Place. Price blends it in with setting and character information, as in the passage about dust from passing cars getting on the berries the Negro children picked:

It settled on leaves too—on dogwood and hickory and thin pine and holly and now and then a sycamore and on Mr. Isaac Alston's cherry trees that huddled around the pond he had made for the *hot air* to pass over, *choked and tan* till there would come a rain—trees he had set out as switches . . .¹¹

At Mildred's funeral, Rosacoke

took off towards the church, *sinking through the thin crust* of ground with her high heels. When she had walked ten yards alone . . . *her white shoes were tan* . . .¹²

Rosacoke's hair, long and dry and the color of straw, also shows the extreme dryness of this country, as do a casual mention that Wesley was back in Norfolk "sure as the sun poured down," a bitter old briar or a stick cracking here, hot air coming out to meet Rosacoke there—on and on. Why, even sleeping Landon is described as the "size of a dry cornstalk," when I'm sure there must have been a dozen other things Price could have said about him. A bird sings "holding up its one clear voice like a weed in a scorching day." Mildred's fatherless child is described as a "hard dry little fellow." And tracing Wesley after Mildred's funeral we find Rosacoke coming to

long stretches where the *dust* had blown away, and there would be nothing but the *baked red ground* that took no more sign of Wesley than if he had flown every now and then . . . she would walk even faster to get to the next *deep dust* till her legs . . . were *streaked with the red* and her shoes were fit for nothing but burning.¹³

I could go on and on, but I think the point here is clear. We get a definite picture, even the

feeling, of Warren County (wanting to dip the pages in a bucket of water!) as well as entering it by means of the general mood of the story.

There is still another way Price lets us know more about his Place in *A Long and Happy Life*: through the people. It's not everywhere a colored and a white girl are best friends (especially in the South), or that one feels free to unbutton and nurse a crying baby in a church, which, incidentally, has at the back a paper bag nailed to the wall with a note saying KINDLY LEAVE GUM HERE. We see coontails on motorcycles and taste Brunswick stew that Mr. Gupton couldn't eat because he lost his teeth (possibly *in* the stew!) at the picnic. The people and their habits do a great deal to give the reader a true picture of Place.

The language of these people also helps us "place" them. They "didn't hardly know" something, or they "tore off to" somewhere; they "reckoned" about this and that. The conversation is casual and honest—like Rosacoke. She said to Mildred once,

"Mildred, why don't you buy some stuffing? Your bosoms look like fried eggs"—¹⁴ And when Mr. Mason asked her what to preach on one evening,

"Well, if you don't know by now," she said, "I'm glad I haven't got to listen."
. . . And he wasn't offended—¹⁵

There is no doubt about it—we know this place in the country almost as well as Reynolds Price does, and as well as we know Wolfe's Asheville mountains. And why shouldn't we, when a good novelist tries to relate accurately to readers what he sees and feels? This small community of folk is real to us. Mr. Isaac, the Guptons, and others, are just as alive as our next-door neighbors, largely because Price gives us a true sense of Place, though ever so subtly at times.

The second method employed by Price in *A Long and Happy Life*, the method Henry James used so effectively in such stories as *Daisy Miller* and *The Turn of the Screw*, is the technique of telling a story from a restricted

point of view, and presenting characters and situations as seen psychologically through the eyes of one person. Numerous modern writers have used the Jamesian "central consciousness" method with success. Our Southern William Faulkner, for instance, in *The Sound and the Fury*, depends on the stream of consciousness to compel his readers to take part in a strange story that is told as it is experienced not by one character, but by three characters, in turn, and then the author. In the end, more discovery takes place in the mind of the reader than in that of anyone in the story. The novel has demanded of him his own *involvement*. The part of *The Sound and the Fury* which is told by the idiot boy, Benjy, is one of the most thought-provoking pieces I have ever read—because my imagination had to work so actively along with Faulkner's.

But what has this method of James, that Faulkner used so effectively, to do with Price's novel? To be sure, *A Long and Happy Life* is not essentially like *The Sound and the Fury*; but generally speaking the two authors use variations of James' original central consciousness. *A Long and Happy Life* is related, almost without exception, from Rosacoke Mustian's point of view. A young man trying to convey the feelings and emotions of a young girl takes on quite a task, and it could easily have resulted in a sloppy presentation of untruths or clichés. But it did not.

From beginning to end, Wesley Beavers' feelings about Rosacoke are just as vague to us as they are to Rosacoke. Throughout the novel a sense of loneliness, an agony, is maintained, which we feel too, because not only does Rosacoke want to know where she stands with Wesley, but we want to know where Rosacoke stands, too. Price's use of central consciousness carries us into each situation with Rosacoke, suffering her anxieties, and that really takes some doing.

We are there when Rosacoke says to herself, "Supposing I never lay eyes on him again;" when she tells the cardinal he'd better stay in North Carolina, and when she cries out loud in

the night, "What am I going to do?" after Wesley has given her his unwelcome gift. We drift along with Rosacoke's thought, too—of days with Mildred, experiences with Mr. Isaac, the death of her daddy. The afternoon she gathers strength to tell Wesley how she's been sitting "on my behind for the best part of three years" and that she needs some answers from *him*, we are with Rosacoke on the low grass, waiting. We hope to get a word, a look to show Wesley's feelings, but what do we get? No more and no less than Rosacoke:

He didn't speak and when she turned to him he was just looking at his feet that were almost gone in the dark . . . he didn't look up . . . He didn't even answer . . .¹⁶ Little things like Wesley's "Congratulations, mules," when Rosacoke turned him down after the picnic, his sending postcards to Rosacoke's letters, and his saying "Rosacoke' like an answer for a doctor that asked to see his tonsils"¹⁷ tell us as much as we know about Wesley, except in the very end, where Price has Wesley "not understanding, hoping he just had to wait."¹⁸

Everything in the story is seen and felt through the insight that Price has into the mind of a young girl. Her expanding consciousness affords the pattern of the novel. The reader is taken into the psyche of Rosa and feels what she feels, sees what she sees. Even in the end, though Rosa never comes right out and answers Wesley's marriage proposal, by following her thoughts through the symbolic Christmas pageant we are left feeling that we sort of know her answer, and that we understand her decision. Wesley gave to her a gift, though unwelcome (like Christ?), and did his duty by proposing; in turn, she must also do her duty by accepting him. Only he can save her from loneliness; he *knows* her as no one else does.

The fact that in the entire piece Rosa smiles just once—and never laughs—does much to add to the general mood of loneliness and despair we feel. She is a girl with a "bottomless capacity for love."¹⁹ We know her struggle; Price has let us share her agony. And it is essentially

his ability to convey Place to the reader, as well as his use of central consciousness, that has created for us a novel that represents life; life in which we ourselves take intimate part.

William Faulkner said, in his Nobel Prize address, that

the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself . . . alone can make good writing, because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat, and that

A writer should have no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths, lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.²⁰

The truth of such statements the promising Southerner, Reynolds Price, artfully bears out in his first short novel. It is truly an experience to read *A Long and Happy Life*. And I do hope Rosacoke had one!

FOOTNOTES

¹ Blair, Hornberger, and Stewart, "Historical Interchapters," *The Literature of the United States* (New York, 1961), p. 767.

² Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *The Literature of the United States* (New York, 1961), p. 502.

³ Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction," speech at Converse College (April, 1962).

⁴ Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* (New York, 1952), p. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁸ Reynolds Price, *A Long and Happy Life*, *Harper's*, Vol. 224 (April, 1962), p. 107.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁹ Granville Hicks, "Reynolds Price," *The Saturday Review* (March, 1962), p. 17.

²⁰ Blair, *op. cit.*

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The Soul Speaks

I can hardly wait, I'm almost
there.

Though it's hot in here, he doesn't have
To worry about breathing.

I wonder why the lining's so
Soft around, over, and under him—
He doesn't feel anymore.

He sure is a good-looking fellow,
Nicely dressed, so very neat—all in all,
Isn't it a shame?

Through Tears

—SUE BETH SLOCUM

Swirling, tossing back and forth,
Nothing to grab on to,
Can I be saved?

Head dizzy, eyes blurred
With stinging, burning torture,
Hard to breathe, almost suffocation.

Body torn, mind torn, and confused
With a multitude of thoughts;
Memories come swimming towards me
Like a school of fish being chased.

Darkness surrounds me,
All is a blindness, a
Fear through tears.

Quivering body, complete lack of any
Thought but the desire to live;
Survival of the fittest—
That's a laugh!

—SUE BETH SLOCUM

More Laundry Summers

Becky Garrison

MAE AND DORA

"I'm five by five," Mae used to say when describing herself. "Five feet tall and five feet wide." Then she'd give her whickering laugh to let us know she had no outward sensitivity to the enormous amount of fat surrounding her bones. Actually Mae wasn't really five by five—five-two by six would be more like it. Really tremendous in body, and with no redeeming features in the round face or mannishly short, straight hair, Mae's physical unattractiveness made us both a little shy, I think. But I was determined to get her talking, for the fact that Mae, in spite of her size, had gotten a husband, set her position fairly high according to my adolescent standards. I don't suppose John, practically blind in one eye and a little worse off in the other, crippled and walking with a cane, could be considered a "fine catch," but after working with these people for several months I had adopted their easy-going philosophy of "a man's a man." When Mae did start talking to me I almost regretted my determined effort, because John and his eye operation became the beginning and ending point of our Saturday afternoon chit-chat.

"That hour and twenty minutes John was on the table seemed like two years to me!" she would begin. "I walked around that waitin' room till I couldn't stand it. And his mother just a'sittin' there cryin' the whole time. His mother and two sisters came to stay, but mighty little comfort they were. I had to get up every mornin' and cook a hot breakfast for them before we went to the hospital. And then they set there cryin'. I didn't shed one tear, but I was purely thankful when Dr. Wilkes come in and told me John was goin' to be all right.—Your mother goes to Dr. Wilkes, don't she? He's a good man, and I'll never forget what he done for John."

I sighed. I'm sure I'll never forget what he "done" for John either. To get her mind out of the operating room I'd ask, "When did his mother and sisters leave? Did you have to keep on cooking for them even when John came home?"

But Mae really shouldn't be mentioned except in connection with Dora,

since they worked together putting sheets and pillowcases and face towels through the flatiron. Poor Dora was such susceptible prey to my tickling, when I idly wandered past looking innocent, going to the water fountain! One half-poke at her ribs and a pillowcase almost at the flatiron would fly into the air, accompanied by a shriek and "Don't you *do* that!" Dora's lack of clothes-sense brought her to work in some of the weirdest get-ups—plaid blouses with figured skirts, or an everyday, striped work skirt worn with a blue, sheer, frilly blouse. Her attitude about men, and the stories she told, never ceased to amaze me. Three times married, she often said, "As long as they's a man alive, I'm gonna be married." During lunch she'd talk about Mr. Horne, number one, who had had a habit of disappearing for days at a time. Dora said she got tired of that and left him.

"But Dora," I asked naively, "didn't you love him?"

"Why sure I loved him, honey, I love 'em all!"

Mr. Hart, number two, unfortunately thought he could keep up with his bachelor dating life and still be a married man. I forget now whether he died or whether Dora divorced him. The third husband, Mr. Winters, I observed firsthand. A short, chunky little man—at least a head shorter than Dora—he must have been twenty years older. But she obviously had him very well cowed. He would bring Dora and Mae to work at eight o'clock, park his rusted green car beside the laundry, and because he worked as a night watchman, would make himself comfortable on the front seat and sleep until time to take them home for lunch. Again, in the afternoon, he'd sleep or hang around Dora, sometimes helping, until time to go home for the day. Dora Horne Hart Winters seemed to be a happy, well-adjusted working wife. I often wondered about her husband.

At first Dora and Mae got along fine working together, but it wasn't long before they each began to suspect that the other put less items through the iron. They didn't mind doing the work, but they wanted it equal, so for several days with every item Dora put through she would glance to make sure Mae did one. Mae watched her partner just as closely. Neither said anything for a day or two, but both kept busy with their shifting eyes. Finally one day during break Dora told Elsie that Mae wasn't doing her share of the work, and if she didn't get better she would tell Mr. Roberson. Elsie knew her job in the matter, and wasted no time in letting Mae know what Dora had said. In the middle of the afternoon Mae turned to Dora: "You been to get water three times, and I haven't been once since lunch! And I been countin' and you didn't put through but eight face towels when I did twelve! I'm going to see Mr. Roberson right now."

Dora didn't say a word, but picked up a wet towel and slung it across the buggy to hit Mae's shoulder. Mae took two steps and popped Dora right in the face with a pillowcase. Then it really got rough. By the time Mr. Roberson got there, damp, trompled linens surrounded the buggy and Dora was pulling Mae's short hair for all she was worth, while Mae yelled like a dying pig. The linens were rewashed, and Dora and Mae went back to work side by side, putting sheets through the flatiron. When I left the laundry a few months later, they still hadn't spoken a word to each other.

TOT

Every morning we could hear Tot coming a block away. Screaming from the transistor radio, turned up as high as it would go, rock-and-roll music acknowledged her presence all day long; but I can remember Tot best at five till eight, swinging down the street to work in time to the music. Although she wasn't hard of hearing by any means, Tot held the bright red radio right up next to her ear and walked rhythmically to its sounds, oblivious to the stare of other pedestrians. Sometimes when the battery wore out, the radio was quiet, but otherwise, from her corner formed by three huge presses, loud music could be heard all day.

My first two summers at the laundry I lived in fear of Tot. Those were the summers I worked up front and saw her only when I would request her to press a pair of pants for a waiting customer. The grumbling and griping she did on these occasions scared me so, that when I found I'd have to work with this bad-tempered Negro for three whole months I was a little more than apprehensive. And her sour mood that first week did little to help me.

"Whut pair of pants you huntin' for? Cain't you leave me alone? I ain't never gon' get through this lot if you don' quit *botherin'* me!" This sort of harangue would go on while I searched for the pair of pants needed by an impatient customer. When I would find them, and tell her the man was waiting, she'd mumble to herself loud enough for me to hear:

"Whut lot did they come out of? The boss comes back here and tells me I better not jump lots, and now she gives me these pants to iron! If that girl don' leave me alone I won' be out o' here by Saturday night!" (She never could seem to understand that she would have had to iron the pants later anyway.) I would slide away, leaving the darky muttering to herself, and hope she had heard me say the man was waiting. After going through this ordeal four or five times and always finding the pants ready when I returned, I realized Tot's grumbling only made another noise for her to work by. Of course, I suppose it was sincere when I made her press three pairs of pants during lunch hour once and discovered, just as she was finishing the third one, that I'd picked out the wrong three.

A long and dangerous career had been ended when Tot entered the church two years earlier. I can remember my older brother's telling about the clothes she used to bring in on Monday morning—slashed and torn from knife fights on Saturday night. Mrs. Smith's husband, a former policeman, said she'd killed a man once, and in answering my query about the scar on her forehead Tot herself had said it was from a fight. She loved telling me, and I certainly loved hearing, about the three years she'd spent in prison for selling bootleg whiskey.

"Sometimes I'd make a hundred dollars a week, selling whiskey," she'd say.

"Shoot, Tot!—that's a heap more than you make now. What'd you stop for?" Although I knew the answer perfectly well, I asked, just the same.

"I got the spirit and joined the church. Ain't you never had the spirit?" I had to admit I'd never "gotten" it in exactly the same forceful way as she had. Prison hadn't been so bad, Tot remembered. As a matter of fact, it was pretty nice. Three meals a day, laundry done free, a little time to get out-of-doors—yep, it had been o.k. But of course Tot had put this kind of life completely behind her, and as a church-loving Christian worked seven hours a day for a pitifully small salary and spent every Saturday night, at one time her party night, cleaning up her church.

Tot was an immodest body. After a long day of hot, sweaty work when she felt she just couldn't walk across the building to the rest room, she had no compunctions at all about changing her clothes right there in the corner.

"Tot!" I shrieked one day when she stood calmly pulling a clean dress over her head,—“you're not supposed to dress out in the open!”

"Aw shoo, Becky. Is Mr. Roberson around?"

"No."

"Then whut you worried for?"

Well, what was I worried for?

Short, square Tot, black as a piece of freshly broken coal and twice as shiny. I loved her. When I went back down to the laundry at Christmas I noticed her radio was gone. Mr. Roberson said she'd had to pawn it to pay the light bill one month.

LORENE

Lorene just couldn't understand why the housing project authorities wanted to evict her. It was none of *their* business if her boy friend spent every weekend there! And besides, he promised they were soon going to be married. He promised last summer they'd get married in September, as soon as his divorce became final. Then, in September, he promised to marry her at Thanksgiving. He hadn't been free in a long time, he explained, and wanted to see what it was like for a while. Then, at Thanksgiving his sick mother needed his care, and the wedding was postponed again. When I was home during my spring holidays a few weeks before Easter, Lorene said she and Oscar were going to get married on Easter, and even if he backed out again she was going to wear her wedding dress to church that day. I got a letter from Mrs. Roberson not long ago telling me that Lorene had gone to church on Easter Sunday alone. I really couldn't blame Oscar. Lorene with her long hair, straight except for a little frizzy permanent on the ends, her rotten teeth and foul breath, and her air of superiority, would send any normal male running. Anyway, Oscar had everything he wanted without marrying Lorene. She did his laundry, kept him over the weekend, and never pressed too anxiously about marriage.

Practically an outcast because she tried to be a little better than the flat-

iron workers, yet couldn't quite equal the office girls, Lorene must have been a lonely woman. But her sharp tongue and habit of making one feel idiotic kept the other employees at a distance. Often I'd have to ask her to help me look for a seemingly lost bundle and invariably she'd find it right where it was supposed to be. A superior smile and the nasal comment, "If it'd been a snake, it woulda bit ya," never failed to leave me feeling hopelessly stupid.

Lorene prided herself on being punctual, faithful, and indefatigable. She always stated her accomplishments matter-of-factly, but you could hear the pride behind the brusqueness.

"I put in nigh onto twenty-six bundles yesterday," she would comment *apropos* of nothing, and the following silence I would quickly fill with praise. I needed Lorene's help too badly to get on her black list. Once on that list an employee had no chance. Lorene could remember which clothes belonged to which townspeople, who brought only sheets on Thursdays or who brought the family wash once a month. If we up front sometimes got rushed and didn't get a ticket written before we'd forgotten whose bundle lay sprawled on the counter, one glance from Lorene (often she could tell just by the outside), identified the laundry. And sometimes stray pieces which would come out of the wash would be recognized by Lorene and thus restored to the proper bundle. I'll never forget the day she recognized Henry Stone's little bundle of handkerchiefs and underclothes by one ragged pair of shorts! But Lorene could be vindictive if she didn't like you. Many a hopeful young routeman quit after the first week because Lorene had spoken scornfully of "that new man" in his hearing.

I never liked to talk very much with Lorene about her pre-laundry life. While the others often told interesting or exciting or amusing tales, Lorene's life seemed always to have been dull and drab. At one time she had worked as maid and housekeeper for a family of several children, and it must have been ghastly. Anybody who thought counting dirty, filthy clothes all day long an improvement in jobs, must certainly have had a bad one before. And I never really got to know Barbara Ann, Lorene's daughter of dubious fatherhood. She seemed to be as dreary and sad as her mother.

"Do you like to skate, Barbara Ann?"

"Yeah, but mother won't let me."

"Well, what about movies? Do you ever go?"

"Sometimes. But we don't never have enough money."

Lorene interrupted when I asked Barbara Ann about her church.

"We don't go 'cause we ain't got nice enough clothes."

That shut me up. It began to look as if Lorene's only happiness could be in marrying Oscar, and I started looking forward as hopefully as she to the date set for the wedding. I couldn't figure out why she didn't get discouraged when Oscar kept eluding her. But each time, without any visible sign of emotion, she would give us the explanation he'd given her and tell us the new date.

Lorene's life—so gray and mournful—depressed me. She almost never laughed except at someone else's mistakes. She opened a conversation de-

fensively and responded to a conversation with defensive remarks. She never seemed to look forward to things, even little things, as the rest of us did. When we were all so excited about getting off for July Fourth she just said, "We'll have that much more work to do when we get back." Even the prospect of marriage must have lost its excitement after the date was put off for so many times. One afternoon I walked home with Lorene, since the housing project was only a few blocks from my house. She talked more freely about her past on that walk than she ever had before.

"You don't know whut's real hard," she said, "till you lose your Mother and Daddy in the same year. Mama hadn't been dead hardly two months 'fore my Daddy had his heart attack. I weren't but sixteen then, and the youngest. Hit was hard gettin' along without them. My sister's husband didn't want nobody livin' with them and my brother's house was too small with all his young'uns. Hit was mighty hard."

I, looking at Lorene's red hands with uneven chipped-polish nails, her face that always seemed dirty even early in the morning, the greasy spots on her glasses so I wondered how she could see out—I, looking at these things, saw that it had been hard. And I didn't want her to say any more. But she kept on talking.

"Then Barbara Ann come along and I went to work as a waitress. Didn't make hardly no money—and she was a'needin' clothes. My kinfolks wouldn't help me either, and I know they could've."

We walked into the block of the project where numbers of streets that looked alike crossed each other in front of apartments that all looked alike. The sun had gone down and grayness was everywhere. Lorene asked me in to see her house and I said yes, although I was scared and sickened by the story of her life, and wanted to get home to help Mother fix hot supper for Daddy and Robert. And I wanted to get there to eat it with them, all of us together, loving each other, eating in the yellow light of the dining room around a white-clothed table. Lorene opened the door into a drab, meagerly furnished living room with gray cinder-block walls and dirty-brown furniture. The light from a small lamp in the corner shone on one cheap, dime-store picture of Jesus. The scaredness and emptiness welled up within me and brought a frantic prayer, "Oh God, save me from this!" I scarcely saw the small kitchen and two upstairs bedrooms, so eager was I to get away. Walking on home alone in the dark I welcomed each step of the return to my own world. A dark figure loomed at the top of the steps on the porch. Daddy had been waiting for me.

GERTRUD

"I had forgotten about the new law," Gertrud told us, "and when I passed my next-door neighbor on the street I said 'good morning' instead of 'Heil Hitler'. About two hours later the police came and told my parents I'd have to go to jail until money could be raised to get me out on bail. Since it was Sunday Papa had no way of getting money out of the banks, and I had to spend the night in jail. It all seemed a grand lark to me then—but I was only sixteen. Mother thought differently. When I came home next morning laughing about my exciting night, I walked in with a salute and said, 'Heil Hitler' to mother. The look she gave me stopped my laughter right then. 'In my house you will always say "good day." Never let me hear anything else!'"

Our German-born office girl told many other stories of living in the midst of a war. Gertrud had gotten a shrapnel wound in her back when a bomb exploded across the street from where she worked. Her brother had been killed in the war. She had met her husband, a sergeant in the American army, when our troops were stationed over there. After twelve years in America Gertrud's accent still gave her away as German, and customers who were veterans loved talking about their experiences in her country.

Gertrud entered our hot, steamy world at the laundry so quickly we had no time to form an opinion about her. She appeared one day at lunch dressed in heels and a tight dress and wearing earrings and bracelets. The routeman had told her that morning, she said, that we had an opening. Mr. Roberson, desperate for a girl to figure tickets, hired her right then, and told her to stay for the afternoon so she could start learning. The earrings and tight dresses and high heels would never do, we tried to tell her, since it was always so hot working in all that steam, and since so much of the work was nothing more than manual labor—bending and tying and pushing and pulling. But Gertrud merely smiled and said she preferred to work in heels, and kept on coming to work in impractical outfits.

We liked Gertrud at first, but as the weeks went by, little things we'd tried to ignore became more and more persistent. Every week she would come in from lunch with a new dress or blouse or shorts for herself. I kept telling myself that she was just enjoying having a little money of her own, and would soon start buying school dresses for her small daughter or new jeans for the boys. But she didn't. Oh, occasionally she'd come in with a little slip or blouse for Pat, or a shirt for one of the boys, but these always lay in a bag with a new dress for herself. We began noticing other things, too. Often what she said she did, and what we actually observed, were opposite matters.

"My neighbor is so awful with her children. She just lets them run around like wild chickens! They are always in my house, dirty and hungry." If she felt this way about her neighbor's children, then why did she let her own wander around town dirty, and unkempt, I wondered? And it seemed that she could never get to work on time. "The car had a flat tire," or "Arthur didn't

come home till late" were her standard excuses if Mr. Roberson happened to be in the front when she dashed in. Her excuses for being late after lunch were even flimsier, but our mean looks never seemed to bother her.

Gertrud's small size made the rest of the employees look like super Amazons, and her short brown hair and blue, blue eyes always attracted men customers. Her quickness and wit, too, brought more and more men with the family wash, a job which up until then, they'd been only too willing to leave to their wives. Rumors flew thick and fast among the other employees. They didn't like her dressing up—nobody had ever done it before. They didn't like the way Tom Rentz hung around her desk every day for an hour or so. There was something mighty funny about this woman.

But Gertrud could always make herself appear in a good light with those who counted. When Mr. Roberson came up front to supervise for a while she couldn't have worked any harder. Tickets flew from the unpriced pile to the priced; customers were barely at the door before she had jumped into position behind the counter and smilingly stood waiting to get the name; she couldn't stop for a Coke just then,—she had too much to do. As soon as Mr. Roberson wandered back towards the dry-cleaning plant, though, the industrious, hard worker disappeared and our same Gertrud sat there chatting on the phone with a friend (male, no doubt) while a customer impatiently tapped on the counter.

"Arthur is taking the young'uns fishing Saturday. No, not then. I have to work till noon. We went down to Florida last weekend and I think the kids want to go back there. Probably about eight-thirty or nine o'clock. No, I won't finish before noon. My hair will be real short. I'm getting it cut today. Oh, excuse me, I've got a customer." (She'd *had* a customer for the last five minutes!)

Talk was still strong when I left for school in the fall. At Christmastime I went back to visit, and Mrs. Roberson barely let me say "Hi" to everybody before she rushed me into her office, shut the door, and announced she had the low-down on Gertrud. It seemed that Miss Blue-Eyes wasn't the sweet, hard-working little woman she'd tried to appear to be. "Right after you left," Mrs. Roberson said, "Mr. Roberson hired a new Wash-O-Mat girl who turned out to be Gertrud's first cousin by marriage. Miz. Wildes hated Gertrud, and told us all about her. She said Gertrud had left her three children to go to Florida with another man. The reason Wildes knew so much was because Arthur had come to her with the children and asked her to take care of them while he worked. Well, after some time Gertrud got pregnant and the man left. And then she had the nerve to come back to Arthur! He said he was glad she'd come back, and took both her and the baby. Can you imagine? Wildes said she was mighty glad Gertrud had come back, too. Those three young'uns were too much for her."

But Gertrud cannot be presented as all bad. In spite of her marital misdemeanors, her flirtatiousness, her irritating unconcern about waiting customers, Gertrud did possess a generous spirit, although sometimes it seemed to be generous with a purpose. On birthdays she would bring in chocolate or coconut cakes thick with icing. Because the bus station man let her have

Cokes for a nickel when the rest of us had to pay a dime, she got drinks for us during break. Sometimes on Thursday she would bring Mrs. Roberson a hot fish dinner, since she knew Mr. Roberson would be eating at the Kiwanis Club and his wife would eat a sandwich in her office alone. No, Gertrud was not completely bad. And we did miss her the first few weeks after Mr. Roberson fired her for slipping clothes through.

LARAMORE

Our oldest and steadiest employee, Laramore had come with the laundry when Daddy bought it thirty years ago. He had held the same job as dry cleaner all those years, learning more and more about fabrics and spots and cleaners until now even Mr. Roberson consults Laramore first about a fabric problem. Laramore's abilities in the laundry cover far more than merely cleaning silks and wools. Although he hates to step outside the bounds of his own job, if he gets fed up with Mrs. Smith's slowness then he'll sit at the sewing machine and mend some of his customers' torn clothes. Or if Willie Mae leaves without pressing a special and we're frantic because the man is waiting for his pants, Laramore does them. He can clean and block hats so well that men who have suits cleaned somewhere else bring their hats to us. And Laramore's humming is impossible to duplicate. I've practised and practised but I've never been able to get the same high, wavering tone as he can. When I was a little girl and Laramore much younger, he would do a buck dance for me, clicking his tapped heels on the cement floor. Laramore's wife is quite educated and has done much for Negro education in the South, although an old, old employment form shows that Laramore himself never finished the seventh grade.

Laramore is obviously a well-respected man in the Colored community where he lives. He has started a small route among these people, picking up bundles in his own car and driving in every Monday morning with the trunk gaping open, and many times with a bundle on top. Often old, ragged, dirty Negroes come in looking for "Lattimo" and leave, tucking a few dollar bills in their torn coveralls. In emergencies, we too call on Laramore. When Daddy had to be taken to the special up-state hospital Laramore drove Mother to visit him. Another time, one morning, Robert and I ran out of the house—late as usual for school—and found that two tires were flat on Robert's old green jalopy. One phone call to the laundry and in ten minutes Laramore was out front beeping for us to hurry. Sometimes an employee just didn't happen to show up for work and telephone calls produced no answer. Mr. Roberson would furiously take over until Laramore could scout around his neighborhood and find someone to work for a day or two.

Before Robert and I worked at the laundry—when we just ran in for a few minutes now and then—a game grew up between us and Laramore.

I don't even remember now how it started. Whoever saw the other first—Laramore us or we him—would scream out MLCDDC which stood for Moultrie Laundry Cleaners Drink Coca-Cola. It was the grandest thing in the world when we could sneak up behind Willie Mae's press and catch Laramore with the yell! But he usually beat us to it.

After my sixteenth birthday and after I'd spent two summers in the laundry, Mother announced one day during lunch that it was time Laramore began calling me "Miss Becky" instead of just "Becky." Robert and I both hotly protested and made her promise not to say anything to him, so Mother dropped the subject. But she was worried. Laramore seemed to be forgetting himself. Several times when she asked him to bring in a customer's laundry he pretended not to hear, and she had to speak harshly. And he had spoken too condescendingly to her when she asked him whether her new curtains should be cleaned or washed.

"The label says they're drip-dry, don't it?"

"Yes Laramore, but I wonder if cleaning might not . . ."

"Well, if it says drip-dry that means you can wash 'em with soap and water and hang 'em up." Laramore had done the same thing to me several times. I didn't mention them to Mother, and tried to excuse his actions with her. But it was obvious. Laramore was asserting himself too much.

When I came home from college after three months away, I had a wonderful time hugging Smith and Willie Mae and making the rounds of all the employees, asking about husbands and babies and work. Laramore had been gone when I first came in, but was up front after I had spoken to all the people in the back. He stayed by his spotting board knowing I'd come to him. I walked over.

"Hi, Laramore! How's it been?" He held out a hard, black old hand.

"Howdy, Miss Becky. It's good to have you home."

RELATIVE SHOCK

Suzanne MacRae

"Come over and meet your Cousin Mae," Mother called. The creature standing beside her would once upon a time have stirred whispers of witchcraft, potions, and evil rites. Although Cousin Mae could not have been very old, her shoulders hunched over as if they were protecting something secret in her bosom. The flesh seemed to have shrunk away from her skin, which fell in loose folds on her face and arms. Her smile revealed teeth darkened by years of neglect, and spread wrinkles over her tobacco-juice brown complexion.

I subdued little waves of nausea and gritted my teeth. "I'm so glad to meet you," I lied. Until I went to that family reunion, I had never realized the caprice of those insidious things called genes.





Jon

It was in the last winter that Jonny had said
he didn't like it "like thadt" when he
found his blue rubber football cold and
deflated behind the piano.
Now it is summer and rain and night;
Scheherazade within, and morning's tulips on the table.
For Jonny a new game called "make-up" with
Jack and a ball, and perhaps me also—
 trying to remember if there really is something
 I have forgotten . . . of Jon, or of how to remember.
So diffused a dream and quiet the evening, while
a few blocks away the class of '62 celebrates
its graduation—the phrase is high school: there
is no low school, or it is undefined.
Jonny, it's what a tangled web we weave when first
we practice anything at all! Today is
when Thoreau would starve, quote my English prof.
Is it the difference between yesterday and today
 that determines tomorrow?
Violets leave the spring, and I with them in sadness.
Your game of make-up ends, Jonny; you say goodnight,
 and off to bed with Jack . . . the
senior carousing will end without ever knowing
why it began, or where.
Thoreau has been dead one hundred years.
Yes, even you, Rimski-Korsakov, scattering
such painfully beautiful phrases through
these thousand and one nights, would agree
that not all bronze warriors strike the rocks!

Laugh a little, Jonny, before you sleep; you
see, none of us really knows.
Alone and with pounding rain beyond
four walls, I attempt to grasp the intangible;
to hold gently an unknown child.

—SHERYL OWENS

Oaks And Your Flowers

The days are sun-soaked,
the nights all midnight.
We have lived on earth a
million years too soon
to dream of forgetting,
though the patterns twist
a new shape now and then.
When your children laugh
in noon-light, you too
must smile in your secret
self—and that sadness:
your smile recognized as
gaiety, in pain.
Anywhere—go, but
not alone to a hidden
twilight hour, snow-cold
walk, prairie wind and
sunset deaths, and children's
acorns in the rain.
You called and no one answered.
Then you, alone,
tried answering.
—Yes, now for once be
bitter: a cynic's laugh
to the illusion of separateness.
We are neither one nor
two in such a world as this.
Sometimes I think I cannot
bear your loneliness.
Mine also; some things
are past sharing. Know
only that I love you
in this every midnight
where lilies and tigers
line the innocent garden wall.

—SHERYL OWENS

The Desks

From one battered desk to
another
in early morning:
Tell me now what today
will learn—
but do not yet
reveal tomorrow's knowledge.
Our prescribed course
(according to tradition)
is but to sit, and wait for
tomorrow.
And again, what of today?
Today is the day of
the examination,
yes, the test.
The test is important.
The test will get them where
they want to go—
this because all want to go
where the test will get them,—
that is, wherever they are going.
Strange how all winter
frosted windows seal the snow from
our sight. Sometimes I should
like to see beyond the windows
and the frost into
whatever the frost is.

—SHERYL OWENS

IDENTITY

Where gravel meets tar
under sunset
and billboards proclaim the
glories of M₂PG,
there,
huddled and quivering
the warmth of a baby-soft bird,
its grey brown-edged feathers
ruffled with the wind and roar
of each great "semi"; indifferent
drivers cock heads out windows
to see what a girl on a bike
could stare at—on the road—
with such terrified intensity.
Trucks have wheels,
big ones,
eight of them.
The bird could not move.

Cirrostratus spreads its arc across
the sky
and nimbus builds a legend
in the east, a giant
reflector. We are
seen in many hues,
this bird and I.

Snatched gently from traffic,
wrapped in an old jacket, it
stirred and rubbed itself against
the firmness of my hands.
Set down, it hopped a step
or two, faltered, fell.
Sunlight golden on wind-rippled
wheatfields, straw prickly
against my legs there on the slope
of a ditch. A red convertible passed . . .
another truck.

What kind, little bird? Hurt
or ill, or only too young to fly—
and your *nest*? Birds don't
live well in boxes. Birds
were not made for the
absolute North Dakota and speed limits.
Something so tender could
die alone on the prairie, and part
of me with it, unknowing.

On the back steps, with pipette, water,
and oatmeal, the bird and a book
on my lap. Encyclopedic identification:
pheasant.
Vertebrata, Gallinae, Phasianus colchicus-torquata,
native to the Old World.
And pheasants are a kind of bird
people like to kill.

—SHERYL OWENS

Blind Curfew

We have a curfew in our house
which means one may not walk outdoors
to see the stars in myriads pass
or feel dew rise to sparkle grass.
One may not breathe the cooler night,
with shadows, too, grow intimate,
or run, a light and spectral being
as hushed and darkened rhythms sing
below a moon which steady gives
fond smile to would-be fugitives
and neither keeps
kind gaze from him who each night sleeps
unseeing.

—SHERYL OWENS

Quantification

I lost a train by four minutes,
and suddenly now discover the questionable gift of ten hours,
ten hours non-transferable to last week, or night—
that night we crammed choke-full in desperation,
that last longing night aware each second.
Bewildered we were then, too, by four minutes.
Sometimes it was trying to dump our minds out on the
floor or bed like a junky dresser drawer.
What a phenomenon time is anyhow, the scheduled hoax of measure.
I could shout that we're all fooling each other,
or trying, and generally with success;
fooling ourselves.
When now again in thought I cling to you,
it's the minutes that I fight, or love
which makes them what they are.
Timetables are exact, but in Union Station Chicago
each clock slow-moves three hands, to hours,
to oblige diversity.

—SHERYL OWENS

Early September

It was a trip of the guided tour sort,
on a hot day in early September;
and the guide, a widower,
was displaying his mausoleum.

Set back from the street
and near the side entrance of the
house where his daughter lived,
this, his house, was surrounded
by bushes and flowerbeds scattered
as if by the wind, but tenaciously
clinging each to the next—as every-
thing seemed to cling.

Inside, beyond the entry, sat a rocking chair
and an old dog—in fact
the dog was so old that he,
for a moment, distracted one's
gaze from the kitchen. Its walls were hung
from ceiling to near-floor with
mottoes, embroidered and cross-stitched; inside
the cupboard doors were designs which She
had painted, and there on the floor
was a basket, profusely spilling Her
unfinished knitting.

The day, again, was hot;
somewhere in the other house Rachel
was fixing dinner,
and we were led on
into another room of afghans and
hanging flowerpots and
pictures and painted china
and Her sketches there on the table,
and on the floor the rugs She had made.

During this time the conversation
returned to the corruption of one of the
sons—how, somehow, he was no longer
welcome here.

And the company spoke in hushed tones,
talked gently to the parakeet which
had been Hers, and poked
respectful fingers through the steel bars
of its cage. And yet another room
with dried flowers pasted to mats and framed,
and portraits of Her children (the one son,
when he was small, had had clear eyes), and
six hooked rugs on the floor, and weeds
which She had colored and arranged
in vases which She had made.

Then more was said about the son,
but vaguely I remember, because the others had
known him—had seen him, and I
was strictly a visitor.
Somehow the boy had left too soon or
perhaps too decidedly, and there was
a bitterness about the father
as he walked with his cane from
room to room and pointed at this
which had been Hers and that
which was Hers also.
The house was dustless,
well-preserved as tombs in their way
must be, for Rachel came each day
to water the flowers . . .
But still there hung heavy about the house
and in the rooms a hush and a death
of suffocation. Each ray of sun that
filtered between the heavy drapes
was distinctly noticeable
against the myriad of tapestry and crocheting.

As we passed the stairs, the
old man paused, explaining that they were
now too difficult for him with his arthritis.
But everything—he spoke confidently—
was the very same, and Rachel and
Esther cleaned there, too, as usual.

The raucous dinner bell was startling here,
and the guests looked at one another
almost guiltily. Then it was outside
into the warm sunlight again, and through
the wicket arbor to Rachel's, and then
into the dining room

where Her daughters and a son and
their sons and daughters (apparently
there were no other sons or daughters in this
generation as yet), were waiting
to be seated at the long table, covered
with a cloth which She had made.

The conversation was lighter now—or at
least more noisy—and there was talk of
last year's presidential campaign and of the
crops in the Ohio farmland, and I said
that I missed the mountains.

Suddenly breaking the evening and twilight
the chimes began—chimes of the clocks
which were the hobby of Rachel's husband,
clocks which he collected—that one,
there, in the corner had come from Switzer-
land; and nowhere were other bells
heard in quite the same way as
those of the German mantel clock. A couple
of cuckoos there were too, and on the piano
a smaller, intricate timepiece from some
distant, very distant, Oriental workshop.

Later, when the dishes were cleared and
the children caught fireflies on the lawn,
Rachel showed us her latest embroidery
stencils, explaining that she wasn't as
talented in sketching originals as her Mother
had been.

After awhile the children grew sleepy, and
their children-parents took them away
in the Fords; and we went upstairs
to bed—where all the linen was embroidered . . .
and there I stood by the window with the
moonlight and a willow outside—a
comforting presence, for willow trees
are everywhere the same, with mocking whispers.

In the morning again it was hot.
And we dressed in summer and drove to
the church where She had been choir
director and Sunday School Superintendent and
where the large paper fans had been hand-painted . . .
and on the return trip we stopped at

Esther's and looked at her flowers in large
gardens and small gardens, and at the
roses (each had a different name);
and went back to Rachel's and a picnic luncheon.

Again the greying children were there
(except for the Other son) and their
children played hide-and-seek in the bushes
and listened respectfully to their grandfather,
though he never smiled.

With an armful of asters and roses, I
left that afternoon on the 4:07 train.
I suppose the clocks are still chiming
each hour at Rachel's and the flowers
growing in neat rows at her sister's place. Miriam
still decorates luminescent China plates;
and in the mausoleum the old man
still rocks in the kitchen, his
cane beside him, in a house which
will not be allowed to hoard dust—only,
I hope the old dog has not died.

After those hot days,
whenever I see a clear running brook
or watch a sunset behind the mountains,
I remember how willow trees
and fireflies can become a separate
part of existence; I love
the Other son.

—SHERYL OWENS

THE FENCE

Suzanne Swain

The fence was built around the time we were born. It enclosed a large backyard with two oak trees, a scaly sycamore, a full pecan tree, a brick well-house that held many shelves of Mama's tasty strawberry preserves, pickles, and spiced peaches, and a garage, converted into a toolshed for my grandfather's tinkering—that summer's hobby, building birdhouses.

We always played in the back yard, my cousin Babs and I. Mama had told us to stay inside the picket fence because it was built to protect us, and as long as we stayed there, nothing could harm us. The hammock, that stretched between the shady oak trees, was our boat, and crocodiles swam beneath, ready to bite our arms if we dared hang them overboard. Snuggled within it, we told favorite fairytales, and saw faces and bears in the clouds, while Dixie lay sleeping in the crocus bed.

When Mama hung out her clean Monday wash, I would scare her with my pranks on the tall sycamore tree, and then perhaps call out something silly like, "D is for dog, E is for elephant, and F is for Rev. Fisher! Mama, can G be for Rev. Fisher's garden?"

And did the aroma of pickling spices which drifted from Mrs. Lisk's kitchen window sweeten the air on a crisp fall morning! As Babs and I put our mud cakes in the brick oven to bake, the sun peeked through the slats and cast a gray semi-pleated pattern on the ground.

An Empty Space

Roberta T. S. Chalmers

Degas' painting, *The Rehearsal in the Foyer of the Opera*, is remarkable at first glance because the principal figure in it, the *premiere danseuse*, is off to the extreme left, in a stance of temporary repose. On the right, the director, with his music book on the lectern before him, holds his hand up in a gesture of hush and suspense. Some of the dancers are watching; others are practising, unconcerned except with their own exercises, at the bar in the back of the room. Through a half-open door we glimpse another rehearsal, perhaps more active. But here, all seems waiting—the mistiness of the mirror at the rear; the memoried, high gilt ceiling, and even a fragile chair in the foreground, on which a fan and a pair of slippers have been tossed for the nonce. Gradually we realize that Degas is not celebrating anything so much in this picture as the large empty space in the middle of it—the air in which activity must, in a moment, consummate the dance itself, and all the technique in demand for it. This space Degas leaves up to us.

Does it ask to be filled in? I suppose that is the essential question for every artist. William Carlos Williams says, in a brief poem:

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

Actually, so much depends on what the reader or hearer supplies by way of association, memory and reflection. Maybe he sees some raindrops glistening on the edge of a tool-shed roof after a thunderstorm in Nebraska. Maybe he remembers what red is scientifically, and considers the whole prism, and the ingredients of stars. Maybe he thinks how red is the color for marriage in China, white for death, and when he smiles, he is not smiling at the wheelbarrow, but at a letter of Chekhov's he happened to read last night: "You ask me what life is? It is like asking what a carrot is. A carrot is a Carrot, and nothing more is known." Maybe he sees the poem in terms of his grandpa's farmyard, and delights once more not in white chickens, but in the porcelain dots on the feathers of guinea hens, hears their sharp cries, and recalls how avidly he chased them, because he had been told that if only he could catch a guinea hen, and shake it upside down, its eyes would drop out.

Yes, the space in the middle of Degas' painting is open to all of us, even in the letters we receive, of which we say we read between the lines. Here we find out, if we are perceptive enough, that Ed is lonely, although he does not say so; Gertrude would like to get away from home, and be invited to visit; our son needs a new tennis racket before next Thursday at the latest; indifferent-seeming Jim would go to the stake for us any time; Cousin Mathilda doesn't approve of our fiancée; Paul is miffed because we misunderstood something he said to us; a certain rare lily for Uncle Albert's

garden would be the best birthday present we could send him, and dear old Wheelock, our favorite professor at the University, is almost off his rockers, and needs a good long paragraph of appreciation while he can still enjoy the gratitude which is a part of our never-ending debt to him.

A long time ago, when I was a college student, and Mr. Frost was not yet famous, I took a walk with some friends, and with him (he was at Amherst, and called himself our "friend from over the mountain") in the woods around Mount Holyoke. He was lean, tall, and moved briskly, but, as is always his wont, came to a halt when the thinking behind the talking tightened up, or turned crucial. At a fortunate moment for me, I found myself in the rearward with Frost, who indicated a rock. "Sit down," he said. I did. Then, with the urgency of the teacher, he pointed one finger at me. "Don't be too thorough!" he said; "leave something up to other people!" He had asked me to sit down to receive these few words—and on a rock. I thought of them years later when I heard him ask a college president, very kindly, "Can't you be a little more mysterious?"

How much is left up to the church member, for instance, who counts on the sermon, the cantata, and the contralto he so much admires? As he folds his bill into modest squares for the plate, and clears his throat for the Doxology, how ready is he for Degas' empty space—the space for reflection; the influence on all he is, to date, of what may be placed before him of idea, commitment, aspiration?

Summertimes, in childhood, I used to go to a small church in the country with my grandfather, in a "surrey with a fringe on top." Horses would whinny during the sermon. Bees would sometimes fly in and out of the open windows. The deacon's boy pumped the organ, and, true to every cliché, the ladies' choir left much to be desired. But I can still hear one old farmer observe to another, on the green, after the service: "Well,—spoke to our needs, didn't he?" A child in a scalloped dimity dress tied with a satin sash; a child standing alongside, in

traditional leghorn hat and patent leather slippers, I could only partially grasp the import of such query. But I remember the sermon. It was about how St. Paul presumably kept right on picking up sticks for a necessary fire, even though a specially poisonous snake had bit him. I thought about this. After all, I didn't have too many memories, or associations through reading, to work with. But I saw that the idea might mean much to me; that it was something to hold on to for future reference.

Another sermon I heard, when riper years could contribute more to meditation, was preached by Henry Hobson, Anglican Bishop of Southern Ohio, when he averred that he understood the mechanics of the organ, and could play one note, several, and even a chord or two without its being detected that he couldn't possibly take care of a fugue. "God," he said, "is the maximum of complication, plus the maximum of harmony." I have often thought of this when dealing with a houseful of children or guests, and in committee meetings. I still think of it, and reflect on it, and my contemplation of the empty space, in terms of creative rather than memorized choreography, has resulted not so much in a sense of being inadequate, as in a sense of humility, and the wish to do more than in the past toward perfecting whatever technique may be possible to an individual, in view of this definition of the supreme being. Bishop Hobson did not mention the talent hidden in the napkin; the light under the bushel, or that sloth is reckoned among the deadly sins. Such extras were mine to supply, while my neighbor in the pew thought of others. Meanwhile, I could go on to bow in thankful recognition of the genius of Leonardo, Bach, Schweitzer, and of a teacher who had somehow been able to understand my particular ways of getting into trouble; descend far enough into my dismaying pit to catch his crook around my neck, and make the study of physics not only plain to me, but exciting.

William James, in his essay on *Habit*, explains that "even the habit of excessive indulgence in music, for those who are neither

performers themselves nor musically gifted enough to take it in a purely intellectual way, has probably a relaxing effect upon the character. One becomes filled with emotions which habitually pass without prompting to any deed, and so the inertly sentimental condition is kept up." (Similarly, Professor Irving Babbitt, of Harvard, used to admonish us that if on some mountain top we should find ourselves carried away by the view, we were not to err by supposing our sensations religious.) "The remedy would be," James goes on, "never to suffer one's self to have an emotion at a concert, without expressing it afterward in *some* active way. Let the expression be the least thing in the world—speaking genially to one's aunt, or giving up one's seat in a horse-car, if nothing more heroic offers—but let it not fail to take place." This reminds me of my grandfather's diary. In it, Judge Charles E. Teale tells how often in the early morning he used to walk over Brooklyn Bridge, sometimes with friends—of whom Walt Whitman was one—and other times alone. One day, the air and the sunrise provoked such jubilation in his spirit that he sang hymns all the way back to his office. "I sent an immediate message to Lida (his wife)," he wrote, "to come downtown and get herself measured for a new suit."

Reflection, also, can be active worship on the part of the mind, and in this both Catholics and Friends excel, which may reveal the reason why they almost invariably understand each other. In Catholicism various symbols and images and gestures are supplied; vestments shine; bells ring; incense rises, and incantations are heard. These engage the senses, as if they could be left in a nursery school of expected interest and wonder, while the spirit is freed to contemplation, and the joining of itself to all-creative energy and goodness. Friends dispense with any diversions for the flesh, and separate it from the spirit by means of the will alone, to the same end. Well-instructed members of both congregations easily understand the ancient Sanskrit definition of imagination, as the tool which, guided by the will, is able

to reach through the veil of illusion (*maya*) to grasp the truth.

How sad it is, that in many gatherings for worship, nothing much is demanded of the person, on his own part! Actually, he need do nothing except physically—get himself to church on time, with his shoes shined, and the regulated collection in his pocket. His participation may well be limited to the singing of two or three hymns (if he can reach all, or any of the notes), and the saying of a few prayers, from which his thoughts, unchecked, may stray to stocks and bonds, insurance, advertisement, resentment about the settlement of his mother's estate, or anywhere else.

And what of the empty space in education? How much is the American student, now, asked to fill in what is not offered him in the textbook, or by the professor—to call upon memory and association; to come to grips with ideas personally; to originate metaphor? How is it that any student could ask, as one did me, "Why is everything always *about* something; why is it never *it*?" We are well aware of those notebooks, filled with the merely copied-down, sometimes blessedly in shorthand, examinations and final grades in view. Granted, much of it is necessary. "You have to keep a stiff upper lip and get all the facts!" as Ralph Boas once warned me. We know about the desultory discussions that have taken the place of debate, in which one has to be sure of sound points, clear independent support of them, and think fast, on one's feet, dendrites reaching around like plant-tendrils at the depths of the sea. In colleges of today, the most important words are: *role*—as if no activity were actual or sincere; *approach*—as if no one ever got there; *problem* and *project*. Even the most remarkable of poems is taken to have been a "problem" to the poet: of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, "What was Keats' problem here?" The answer is, of course, he hadn't any! A student cannot write even a short paper without making a project of it, to the diminishing of appetite, and the precluding of joy. It seems rather ridiculous that the same professors who laugh at the last

century for forcing a moral upon every literary expression, are now forcing a symbol—and woe to the student who does not recognize as valid the exact symbol that the professor or the commentator has found pertinent!

To me it is heartening that a small women's college of the South, *Queens College*, in Charlotte, North Carolina, now offers a course under Philosophy Department heading, which is called Reflective Thinking. In this course, I should assume that when, for instance, Satan, in the King James version of the Bible (since the translators of this version did understand inflection, or spiritual accuracy) makes that terrible insinuation in his question: "Doth Job fear God for naught?" the students would be able to enter the empty space around the six words. It would be well if any class in religion could hear the silence thunder for awhile over "What is truth?" and decide whether Pilate asked this question in sarcasm, as Tolstoy believed, or not. Was Othello jealous, or just gullible? It would be fine if a class in modern poetry could get the tone-images right when reading aloud Walter De la Mare's *The Listeners*, one reader seeing, for instance, Woodrow Wilson returning, sick and disconsolate, from Geneva. It would be wonderful if any student could apply, for some fleeting moment, a proposition of Euclid's, like that of the "including triangle,"¹ to daily life. It would be wonderful if a student watching the color-wheel turn all colors to white, should repeat to himself by association that

Life, like a dome of many-colored glass
Stains the white radiance of eternity

and thus let one study supplement another.

I have been appalled, as a teacher, by the urge toward the category imposed on all students today; by the neglect of Pascal's dictum for education: that it should make it possible "to believe *and to doubt* well." I have seen students accept in a class in religion the idea that all religion starts with a sense of guilt, even "world-guilt," as a *sine qua non*, and then

go to a class in psychology, and accept the idea that guilt is the most dangerous of the contents of any mind—students who might well receive an A in both courses, without ever perceiving any conflict between these ideas, let alone trying to resolve it as a necessity for personal independence and well-being. "How often do you look out of the window?" I asked one Sophomore, who had meticulously covered pages 84-202. "Why, *never*, when I'm *studying!*" she replied defensively, and was utterly unprepared for my recommendation of that window, or even a wall. What a consolation it was, to have proof of reflection on the part of a Freshman, who was considering in class Conrad Aiken's *Morning Song of Senlin*. She looked as innocent of ideas, under her blond thatch, as Little Red Ridinghood. But, asked for the theme of the poem, she almost shouted, "Oh, it's deference to order!" She meant Universal Order, and her large grey eyes filled with tears. The word *deference*, of course, which she had found, told the whole story of her private contemplation, both intellectual and emotional, and what she had gleaned from it in no spirit of fulfilling an assignment, but of the adventure she had been offered, and of which she had found herself capable.

Wrestling with ideas, by reflection, is essentially the wrestling with an angel who will not tell his name, and by whom we are bound to be worsted in the end, like Jacob, who returned to his tents "halting upon his thigh." At least he knew where he had gone; that he had walked off alone; that he had really been involved, and that he came home wiser, even if exhausted and lamed.

The empty space is the space of true privacy, of all question, independence, ingenuity, and fruitfulness of imagination. It is the place where, as in a poem of Lermontov's,²

Lonely and far a white sail soars
Amid the ocean's bluish spray
What does it seek on distant shores?
What has it left in its own bay?
The wind howls, and the mast bends,

In protest to the rising seas
Alas, the sail no joy is seeking,
And it is not from joy it flees.
Beneath the azure current churns,
Above, the aureate sunlight glows;
Yet for a storm the sail still yearns—
As though in storms one found repose.

The sailboat must be controlled if it is to be free, and herein lies a paradox, since if the tiller is let go and the sails flap, the sailor says that the ship is “in irons.” And the sailor simply has to be tactical, original, equal to risk and chance, until worsted only because anyone would have been worsted, under the circumstances. Personal parrying with fate; the curiosity of Monsieur Seguin’s goat about just how long he could endure against the wolf; the curiosity of the soldier, who does not know if he is brave or not, and never will know, except in

battle; the yearning to establish such repose as can only be established in the midst of storm, are too rarely considered nowadays, if “man, as man, is a spirit,” and hopes to save himself alive as such.

So the dancer, turning on her burnished heel, is about to enter space, on music which many others have heard, and many others have danced to, but for which her steps will be different from theirs. *How* different, and how successful in the difference? All the devotion, all the skill, and all the glory, is in the emptiness that waits for her, and for us, just as Degas has painted it.

FOOTNOTES

¹ The sum of two lines drawn from a point to the ends of a given line is greater than the sum of two other lines similarly drawn but included by them.

² Translated from the Russian by Bernard Guilbert Guerney.

